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ABSTRACT

The study of dialects offers a fascinating approach to learning about language. By learning about how language varies geographically and socially, students will come to understand that language changes over time, and that language use is linked to social identity. Language variation, or dialect diversity, reflects the fact that languages change over time and that people who live in the same geographical area or maintain the same social identity share language norms. Although dialects differ geographically and socially, no dialect is better structurally than another. While many people believe there to be only one correct form of a language, what is standard actually varies from dialect to dialect. If people have a better understanding of how language works, they would probably be less inclined to make negative judgments about speakers of different dialects. This digest addresses some of the difficulties teachers may encounter in teaching about dialects and provides several activities for helping students learn more about language and understand that language variation is a natural phenomenon. (VWL)

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Teaching About Dialects

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The study of dialects offers a fascinating approach to learning about language. Ideally, by learning about how language varies geographically and socially, students will come to understand at least two basic facts about language: 1) that language changes over time, and 2) that language use is linked to social identity.

Language variation, or dialect diversity, reflects the fact that languages change over time and that people who live in the same geographical area or maintain the same social identity share language norms; in other words, they speak the same dialect. Although dialects differ geographically and socially, no dialect is better structurally than another. While many people believe there to be only one correct form of a language, what is standard actually varies from dialect to dialect. For example, the normal Southern pronunciation of the word *pin* does not differ from the pronunciation of the word *pen*. But because other dialects make a distinction between the vowels *i* and *e* preceding the nasal sound /n/, speakers of those dialects may assess the Southern pronunciation as incorrect instead of simply different. Judging someone's pronunciation (or grammar or word choice) as wrong may lead to unwarranted judgments about their intelligence or ability.

Such dialect discrimination is widely tolerated in the United States. If people had a better understanding of how language works, they would probably be less inclined to make negative judgments about speakers of different dialects. Knowledge about how language works is fundamental to understanding human communication in the same way that a knowledge of biology leads to a better understanding of how the human body works.

This digest addresses some of the difficulties teachers may encounter in teaching about dialects and provides several activities for helping students learn more about language and understand that language variation is a natural phenomenon.

Difficulties in Teaching About Dialects

In teaching about dialects (i.e., language variation), teachers may encounter certain challenges, including widespread misperceptions about how language works and intolerance toward disempowered groups. Teaching about language variation may mean questioning some widely held views about language. While popular views are not always inaccurate, they may need to be re-examined. For example, blood-letting was widely perceived as an appropriate solution for certain diseases when the body was believed to have four primary humors that controlled health; since then, advances in medical knowledge have led people to change their view of blood-letting. In the same way, many people believe that there is a single set of standards for English, but linguistic science shows that Standard English in one part of the country is somewhat different from Standard English in other parts of the country and from Standard English in other English-speaking countries. Debate about what is "correct" can become a moral battlefield in which individuals argue the merits of language use and language instruction according to absolute standards of right and wrong.

Teachers can navigate this potential minefield by increasing their own knowledge about sociolinguistic research on dialects of English. (See Demo, 2000, for a reading list.) They will come to understand and can help their students understand that the difference between the Standard English dialect spoken in Boston and the Standard English dialect spoken in Atlanta can be explained by differences in regional norms for language use. The difference between Standard English in Baltimore and vernacular English dialects in Baltimore (e.g., African American Vernacular English and urban Appalachian English) is explained by different social norms.

Attitudes about various dialects may also be influenced by a continuing intolerance toward different ethnic and cultural groups. Teachers can directly address implicit or institutionalized discrimination that shows up in language (e.g., "the lady doctor" vs. "the doctor") or in attitudes toward language. The extent to which the teacher is responsible for changing attitudes about other people is a difficult question, but an open examination of language attitudes can provide opportunities to discuss broader social issues.

Teaching About Dialects

Examining Assumptions

The best approach for teaching about dialects is to invite students into a dialogue that engages them in examining some basic assumptions. This is not an easy process, but most audiences demonstrate a high level of interest in language matters. Teachers might start with a series of true-or-false questions, such as the following:

True or False

1. Language is one of our most important cultural inventions.
2. Language change is a process of decay.
3. Grammar books used in schools cover most of the rules and processes of English.
4. Eskimos have many words for snow, and they "see" snow differently than others do.
5. Writing and speech are essentially the same thing.
6. Appalachian English is Elizabethan English.
7. Children require detailed instruction to learn language.

After the students have completed the exercise, the answers can be discussed. (They are all false.) This kind of discussion brings the teacher and the students into an awareness of how certain language-related terms, such as *rules* and *language*, may be used in different senses. The group can decide together what terms they need to define and how to locate and understand scientifically based definitions.

Identifying Language Patterns

Another useful strategy for teaching about dialects involves active learning: looking for patterns of language variation. The teacher should guide the students in examining language samples to find linguistic explanations for the patterns they note. A second set of language samples can be used for testing the students' hypotheses. In this manner, the students are following the scientific method: observation (i.e., looking for patterns), hypothesis development, and hypothesis testing.

A good way to begin is to examine nonstigmatized data first. In other words, look at a case in which variation is considered perfectly acceptable and correct, such as the three spoken forms of the past tense <-ed> (i.e., "walk/t/," "flag/d/," "bat/ld/"), as in the following exercise.

Putting the Past Under the Microscope

Linguistic fact: Sounds are either voiced or voiceless. The /t/ in *time* is voiceless, and the /d/ in *dime* is voiced. Voicing is the only difference between these two sounds. This information will help students understand the exercise described below.

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The following words are all regular verbs, but the past tense marker <-ed> that is attached to them comes in three different phonetic forms: /t/, /d/, and /ld/.

1. Hop	7. Bat
2. Knit	8. Explain
3. Kick	9. Need
4. Score	10. Side
5. Stretch	11. Flex
6. Bag	12. Burn

Say each of these verbs aloud in the past tense. Notice the sound of the past tense marker for each of them. Sort the verbs into the following three columns according to which past tense marker attaches to them.

/t/	/d/	/ld/
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

This exercise helps students understand that language variation is quite normal—something that every English speaker participates in. They see that there is more than one way to pronounce <-ed>, and the choice follows a pattern: If the root word ends in /t/ or /d/, the <-ed> ending is pronounced /ld/. If the root word ends in a voiced sound other than /d/, the <-ed> ending is pronounced /d/; if the root ends in a voiceless sound other than /t/, the ending is pronounced /t/.

Examining Stigmatized Forms

The next step is to introduce stigmatized data, that is, a linguistic pattern that is sometimes evaluated negatively: perhaps *a*-prefixing from Appalachian English (e.g., "She went a-hunting"), habitual *be* from African American Vernacular English (e.g., "Tuesdays, we be bowling"), or the Southern vowel merger (e.g., pronouncing *pin* and *pen* the same) (see Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 1999). It may be best to choose patterns that students are already familiar with. On the other hand, if teachers want to avoid evoking the students' language prejudices (associated with language patterns that students would deem incorrect or nonstandard), they may prefer to use examples of language patterns that are not familiar to the students.

Looking at Language Change

Another means of teaching the idea that language variation is natural is to discuss its role in language change. Lexical variation can offer a good approach. For example, the teacher can ask the students to do a grammatical cloze exercise: "Today I work; yesterday I _____." They will respond, "worked." At this point, the teacher can ask them if there is any stigma attached to the word *worked*. Then the teacher can inform the class that the original form was *wrought* (as in *wrought-iron*) and explain that many of the Old English verbs that formed the past tense by changing a vowel have slipped into the Modern English <-ed> verb category. In such cases, the results of language change are not stigmatized. Verbs in transition can be discussed (e.g., *hang, hanged, hung*). The final category to consider includes verbs that are currently undergoing such change and have stigmatized <-ed> forms (e.g., *know, knowed*).

The general pedagogical approach is to guide the students from considering unstigmatized variation in English to considering stigmatized variation. The goal is to have them understand that stigmatization is a social judgment, not a linguistic matter. Language variation is neither bad nor good. But because discussion of correct English is sure to arise, it is best to address that topic directly. The following definitions are useful.

Correct English Defined

In commenting that a segment of talk or writing is good or correct, non-linguists may have in mind the kinds of criteria for what we would call *Prescriptively Correct English*. Prescriptions for how people should use English can be found in grammar books, books on writing style and usage, and in schools and other institutions. The following assumptions are associated with Prescriptively Correct English:

- Some forms of the language always work better (linguistically) than other forms of the language. For example, "She is not home today" always works better than "She ain't home today."
- English should be protected from corrupting influences that would cause decay in its form. English has already been corrupted by slovenly use and should be reformed to the standards of yesteryear.

But linguists and others are also concerned with using language in ways that are appropriate for the situation. We can call this *Rhetorically Correct English*, and it is associated with the following assumptions:

- Some forms of the language work better than others in certain contexts. For example, there are some contexts in which "She ain't home today" will work better than "She is not home today."
- No institutionalized authority exists to govern the production of English. Appropriate language production is governed by the speaker's intention, the audience, and the context.

Because change is a fundamental feature of human language, the Rhetorically Correct English of any particular context will most likely be different om, but neither inferior nor superior to, the Rhetorically Correct English of yesteryear.

Discussing different views of correct English helps students gain a more scientific understanding of language. The goal is for students to see that language variation is integral to human language.

Conclusion

Language variation is an engaging topic for learning about language. It helps students understand that language has evolved and that it continues to be shaped by geographic, historical, social, and ethnic factors. In addition, learning about language variation allows them to examine their views about what constitutes correct English and to evaluate intolerance toward certain varieties of English. Through the study of language variation, they are better able to understand the dynamics of language and its role in society.

For Further Reading

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